

ISLAND TOURISM IN MALAYSIA: THE NOT SO GOOD NEWS

Badaruddin Mohamed*, Ahmad Puad Mat Som, Jamil Jusoh and Kong Yew Wong

School of Housing, Building & Planning
Universiti Sains Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Tourism is regarded as an important sector to the Malaysian economy. Thanks to intense worldwide promotion by Tourism Malaysia, tourism is reported to bring in almost RM30 Billion of income to the national coffer. The first height of tourism was reached in the first visit Malaysia year of 1990. The tourism rush of the nineties saw many tourism projects being developed through out Malaysia; many of these projects were approved in hasty manners, without proper study and data and without proper approval. However, after a decade of steady growth in both numbers of tourist arrivals as well as the number of new tourism development, many quarters now start to ask whether does tourism really pays off? Today, the impacts of the yesteryears' boom have taken its toll on the physical, economic and social environments of destinations. More and more impacts of the tourism boom years appear in failed projects and abandoned destinations. Visits to major destinations in Malaysia can present us many unfinished businesses and badly maintained infrastructure. This paper reviews tourism development in major islands in Malaysia, namely Langkawi, Pangkor, Tioman and Redang and evaluates real and perceived physical impacts of tourism development. It is based on a perception survey of the people living and working on the four islands. The result shows that while welcoming more tourists and more tourism development, the islanders complain of higher general prices, the depletion of greenery, increased urbanization and many more. Many of these impacts are irreversible. The islanders, however, do not have other option but to carry on with their lives. This paper suggests that in order to sustain the island environment, the carrying capacity of the island must be set and respected.

Keywords: Island Tourism, Physical Impacts, Perceptions, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Tourism sector has been regarded as an important economic generator, creating business and job offers and improving income. Malaysia has taken this sector very seriously, especially after the success of the first tourism boom in 1990, with the success of the Visit Malaysia Year Campaign. Despite the scare of the September 11, 2001 attack on the United States and global economic downturn, the spread of SARS and the Bali bombings, to name a few, Malaysian tourism had enjoyed quite an impressive average growth rate of 9.26% between 1981 and 2000. There was about 16.7 million tourists visited Malaysia by the year 2005, bringing in almost 30 billion in the national coffer, mainly through foreign exchange.

However, the success of the tourism sector of many countries throughout the world, including Malaysia, is often measured in dollars and cents or specifically by the number of international tourist arrivals and the income they bring. It cannot be denied that tourism can generate alternative or additional income to the people, but, as Russell (2003) put it, while tourists may come and go, their presence in the places they visit can result in a permanent impact. He added that tourism in developing countries like Malaysia has been a double-edged sword. Extensive studies have been conducted on the impact of tourism on communities worldwide (Belisle & Hoy, 1980; Liu & Var, 1986; Long, Perdue, & Allen, 1990; McCool & Martin, 1994,

Badaruddin, 1996, for instances). Many of these studies concluded that communities throughout the world welcomed the economic benefits that tourism brought but lamented on the negative effects it brought. However, the euphoria and over focusing on the economic aspects sometimes sidelines other detrimental impacts.

According to Din (Yamashita, Din & Eades, 1997), the lack of serious debate on the impact of tourism by both academics and practitioners in Malaysia (especially) was due mainly to the fact that there have been no major corrosive effects of tourism on local culture and society. This statement perhaps explains why the concept of sustainable tourism and carrying capacity are never seriously taken into consideration when discussing tourism development. Today, the impacts of the yesteryears' development drive have started to appear in the form of water and air pollution, landslides, flashflood, abandoned projects, etc. While it may provide the much-needed income to the populace, the bulk of the benefits tend to leak out. Islanders have to bear the bleak consequences of failed projects that become white elephants, a scene now too familiar in Langkawi.

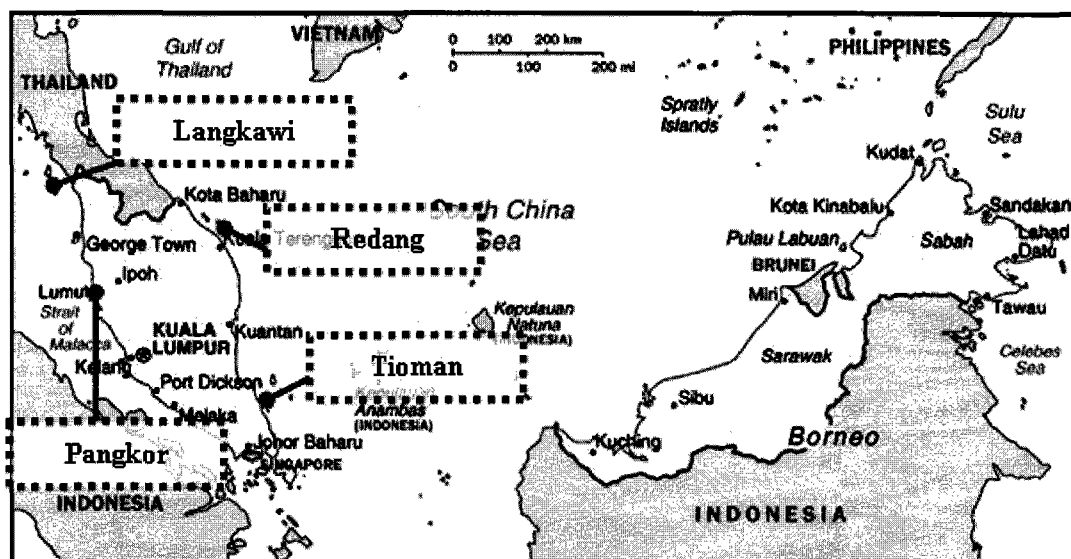


Figure 1 Selected Islands of Malaysia

Source: Modified from <http://www.malaysia-maps.com>

IMPACTS OF TOURISM

The islands of Malaysia continue to be developed into tourist spots, attracting a continuous number of arrivals. Chalets, luxury bungalows and resorts quickly develop along the coastlines of popular islands like Tioman, Redang, Langkawi and Pangkor (Figure 1). After the island of Langkawi, Tioman is also set to become the latest free duty island—a move that is not well received by many of the islanders. Islanders who used to be fishermen have discarded the nets for more lucrative, similarly seasonal work in the tourism sector. Boatmen now take tourists around the islands; some have become guides or are running boat or fishing gear rental businesses. Fishing boats have been modified and turned into leisure craft that take tourists for night fishing trips or snorkeling. It is becoming increasingly evident that tourism has brought changes to both social and physical environments of the islands in Malaysia. Tourism is now the main source of income for the people of Langkawi, Pangkor as well as Redang.

Reports on tourist-activities related damages at popular destinations are abundant. In the Mediterranean, among negative impacts include the forest destruction, changes to the shorelines, sea-pollution and damage to the corals (William & Shaw, 1991). In Malaysia, the decreasing number of visitors to once popular lake of Kenyir was reported to linked to the fact that overdevelopment around the lake had created eyesores and eventually pushed them away. In 1999, Kenyir received 114, 782 visitors, while by the year 2005, the number had decreased to around 15,000. The concentration of mega infrastructure and resorts along the coast has caused major destruction to the mangroves, beaches, and lagoons through sand mining and direct discharge of sewage from the development (Wilkinson, 1989). In islands in Malaysia, oversupply of hotel rooms and chalets due to over projected data, had created unnecessary competition among the resort operators—some eventually have to bow out of the islands, leaving unwanted scar to the landscapes.

Destruction on island's ecological environment can also be the result of the development of extensive infrastructure such as jetty, resorts and airports. Ironically, these infrastructures were intended to support increased number of tourists. In the pretext of reviving tourism, a new and bigger airport that can accommodate Boeing 737 has been planned for Tioman Island. This airport is projected to fly in double the number of current number of tourists to this island. This plan has been criticized by many, arguing the Tioman would not be able to accommodate 400,000 and the expansion of the current airport would further damage the already struggling island. Thus, the underlying notion that more infrastructures can bring more tourists is dangerous and not necessarily true.

A recent example of this thinking is the building of twelve golf-ball-shaped luxury chalets on the marine island park of Payar, about 15 nautical off Langkawi and 32 nautical off Penang. This project received strong criticism not only for its inappropriateness but also because it has not adhered to the basic development requirements when building in a sensitive area, such as providing a sound Environmental Impact Assessment or EIA (Salleh, 2003). In a defense against the critics, the State Government stated that the project would generate economic return to the State while protecting the island environment at the same time! One may have wondered on how the chalet project on the small island can even protect to the already under threat corals? The major threat to the coral island is the uncontrolled tourist activities. At its initial stage (1990), the number of visitors to Payar was merely 4000 people. Soon after it was declared as a marine park, the number jumped to 90,000 by 1998!

RESEARCH FOCUS AND METHODOLOGY

This paper describes results of a research that focuses on the perceived social and physical impact of tourism development on island populations. In this research, the island communities of Langkawi, Redang, Tioman and Pangkor were surveyed to seek their opinion on the potential impact of tourism on the physical and social environments of the islands. The islands were selected as they are experiencing different levels of tourism development, thus, the populace are assumed to experience different levels of impacts and would therefore react differently to the impacts. Langkawi for instance has been transformed into a resort island and has been accorded 'development island' status by the Federal Government. Tioman, on the other hand, is developing at a slower pace despite the fact that backpackers' hangouts in Kampung Tekek have been deserted and they are now being developed into a duty free zone. Redang Island is growing steadily and is becoming popular among both local and international tourists. This island boasts some of the best corals this country can offer. Without proper control though, this island will soon turn into another resort island like Langkawi. Pangkor Island, at the other end, has been declining in popularity due to its close proximity with the mainland and overexposure to the

constant pressure of tourists of all kinds. Physical damage and pollution can be easily traced on this island. Except for the five-star Pangkor Laut Resort, many of the hotels and chalets in this island host domestic travelers who normally visit during the public and school holidays and over the weekends.

The questionnaires were prepared in Malay language and distributed with the help of local research assistants. This survey also received help from the islands' postal service or Pos Malaysia. The research assistants were instructed to distribute the questionnaire to every other house on the islands. A pilot survey to test the questionnaires was conducted prior to the actual running of the survey. The questionnaire was based on past literature on impact studies (for example by Belisle & Hoy, 1980; Liu & Var, 1986, Badaruddin, 1996). It contained seven sections. The first part of the survey focused on the agreement of respondents to selected statements regarding tourism development. Respondents were asked to indicate their opinions based on a Likert Scale of five where five was "strongly agree." The second and third parts asked respondents to indicate their perception on the impact of tourism development on the physical and social livelihood of the people. These parts also asked respondents to state their agreement on selected impact using a Likert Scale of five. The fourth and fifth sections sought answers on the frequency with which respondents met tourists, and their feelings when meeting tourists. Part six dealt with the general feelings of the respondents on whether the level of development of the islands should be increased or controlled. The final part of the questionnaire was on the general demographic background of the respondents, followed by an open-ended section. As mentioned above, this paper, however, will only deliberate on the physical impacts of the development as perceived by the islanders.

RESULTS

The surveys were conducted from November 2004 until May 2005 in selected tourist islands in Malaysia namely Langkawi, Pangkor, Tioman and Redang. Four hundred fifty (450) forms were distributed and 358 forms were returned (79.6%) within the time frame (Table 1). This high return rate can be attributed to the use of local distributors who knew most of the respondents.

Table 1: Forms Distribution and Returns

| Island | Total Of Distribution | Return Rate | Percentage Age (%) |
|----------|-----------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Langkawi | 100 | 100 | 22.2 |
| Redang | 100 | 88 | 19.6 |
| Pangkor | 100 | 93 | 20.7 |
| Tioman | 150 | 77 | 17.1 |
| Total | 450 | 358 | 79.6 |

The respondents consisted of 59.5% male and 40.5% female. 21.5% of them of them were aged 41-55 years old while 20.4% were 25 years old and below. The majority were Malays (65.1%), followed by 4.7% Chinese, 1.7% Indians and 28.5% other. As shown in Table 2, many of the respondents (37.9%) worked in the private sector. Another 35.31% worked on their own, presumably in the tourism sector on jobs like running a car rental service or being agents to hotels and resorts. Only 14.4% worked in the public sector. There were also students and homemakers who participated in the survey. The level of education among the respondents can be considered fair, as nearly 78% of them studied until high school. Over 10% received tertiary education. The

survey also discovered that 27.9% of them were non-natives of the islands. The average length of residency of the respondents was over 25.92 years (Table 3).

Table 2: General Profile of Respondents

| Occupation | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Private | 37.85 |
| Work on their own | 35.31 |
| Public/Government | 14.4 |
| Homemakers | 7.91 |
| Students | 3.67 |
| Others | 0.85 |
| Total | 100.0 |
| Education Level | Percentage (%) |
| Secondary School | 77.98 |
| Primary School | 10.42 |
| University | 6.85 |
| College/Polytechnic | 4.76 |
| Total | 100.00 |

Table 3: Lengths Of Residency

| Length Of Residency (Years) | Native | | Non-Native | |
|-----------------------------|-----------|----------------|------------|--------------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage (%) | Frequency | Percentage Age (%) |
| < 10 years | 10 | 2.79 | 70 | 19.6 |
| 11 – 30 years | 91 | 25.4 | 27 | 7.5 |
| 31 – 50 years | 105 | 29.3 | 3 | 0.8 |
| > 51 years | 30 | 8.4 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Total | 236 | 65.9 | 100 | 27.9 |
| Missing Value: 22 | | | | |

Opinions on Tourism Impacts

As shown in Table 4, respondents in general were proud of their islands. They admitted that tourism had changed the types of job offers, perhaps from the fishing or agriculture sector to the tourism sector. They related tourism to the increased urbanization and the environmental destruction that came along with it. While past research tried to associate tourism development with social problems like prostitution, the island respondents did not seem to agree that tourism was the main contributing factor.

Table 4: Opinions on Statements Pertaining Tourism

| Opinions On Tourism Development | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|------|--------------------|
| Makes us proud of this island | 3.65 | 1.203 |
| Changes types of jobs | 3.56 | 1.200 |
| Increases urbanization | 3.49 | 1.094 |
| Environmental destruction is the result of resort development | 3.41 | 1.236 |
| Opens up reserve lands for exploitation | 3.39 | 1.471 |
| Introduces problems of illegal immigrants/workers | 3.26 | 1.436 |
| Destroys fish & coral reefs | 3.26 | 1.310 |
| Causes the disappearance of green areas | 3.25 | 1.329 |
| Destroys green and sensitive ecosystems (like the mangr oves) | 3.06 | 1.322 |
| Destroys wildlife habitats | 3.03 | 1.439 |
| Contributes to the commoditization of culture | 2.99 | 1.300 |
| Degrades community values | 2.99 | 1.191 |
| Helps conserve heritage and the environment | 2.99 | 1.157 |
| Helps cultural preservation | 2.84 | 1.205 |
| Degrades cultural authenticity and uniqueness | 2.76 | 1.231 |
| Increase prices of lands and buildings | 2.64 | 1.500 |
| Induces prostitution | 2.64 | 1.560 |

N=334 Note: Based on Likert Scale (0=very disagree and 5 =strongly agree)

Table 5: Environmental Impact Indicators

| Statements | Mean | StandardDeviation |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|------|-------------------|
| Water & Power Supply | 3.61 | 1.225 |
| Public access to beach/recreational areas | 3.51 | 1.154 |
| Infrastructure | 3.31 | 1.297 |
| Recreational facilities | 3.29 | 1.326 |
| The beauty of the island | 3.16 | 1.267 |
| Sacredness of heritage areas | 2.88 | 1.154 |
| Cleanliness of food stalls etc | 2.87 | 1.254 |
| Traffic congestion | 2.47 | 0.995 |
| Beach destruction | 2.36 | 1.085 |
| Congestion as public places | 2.34 | 0.961 |
| Destruction the local resources (Such as water, timber, etc) | 2.33 | 1.152 |
| Dumping of rubbish | 2.20 | 1.220 |
| Marine pollution | 2.16 | 1.007 |
| River pollution | 2.06 | 0.997 |
| Land erosion | 1.81 | 0.921 |

N=358

Scale: 0= Do not know; 1= Worsen a lot; 2 = Worsen a little bit; 3 = No impact; 4 = Slightly improved; 5 = Improve a lot

Factor Analysis

A Factor Analysis was conducted to identify the underlying dimensions of the responses and the structure of relationships among respondents. Factor analysis was also useful in identifying

representative variables and to form a new set of variables (Hair et al., 1995). Using the Principal Component Analysis extraction method, the analysis uncovered three factors (Table 6).

Table 6: Factor Analysis on Environmental Impacts

| Environmental Impacts | Component | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------------|--------|-------------|
| | Pollution | Infrastructure | Social | Communality |
| Cleanliness of food stalls etc | 0.720 | | | 0.275* |
| River pollution | 0.661 | | | 0.511 |
| Beach destruction | 0.633 | | | 0.471* |
| Marine pollution | 0.622 | | | 0.506 |
| Dumping of rubbish | 0.587 | | | 0.299* |
| Destruction the local resources (Such as water, timber, etc) | 0.460 | | | 0.471* |
| Land Erosion | | | | 0.727 |
| Infrastructure facilities | | 0.849 | | 0.539 |
| Public access to beach and recreational areas | | 0.713 | | 0.376* |
| Water and power supply | | 0.674 | | 0.524 |
| Recreational facilities | | 0.559 | | 0.474* |
| Sacredness of heritage areas | | | 0.654 | 0.517 |
| The beauty of the island | | | 0.649 | 0.333* |
| Traffic congestion | | | 0.608 | 0.577 |
| Congestion at public spaces (e.g. beaches) | | | 0.508 | 0.516 |

Note: Cut off point: 0.40 | Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. *Communality of below .05, thus these statements may not offer enough explanation.

Factor 1 has six statements loaded onto it. This factor deals mainly with the potential impacts of tourist activities. There is communality among the islanders on the issues of river pollution, beach and local resources destruction, as well as problem with rubbish dumping. This factor is referred as 'Pollution' Factor. The second factor is called 'Infrastructure' as it contains six statements pertaining impacts on the island infrastructure, namely public access, recreational facilities as well as the water and power supply. The third factor has four factors loaded onto it. Two statements deal with congestion while another two deal with sacredness of heritage areas and the beauty of the islands. One statement on the beauty of the island may not offer enough explanation as its communality value is below 0.50. Taken into account the highest loading, we can refer this factor as 'Sacredness'.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As main interest of travelers is to bathe in the sun and sea has made islands among major attractions in Malaysia. Tourism development is welcomed by many formerly isolated islands as it brings much-needed infrastructure as well as job offers and business opportunities. Despite this fact, there are both an obvious and sometimes unseen impacts of the development that must not be ignored. While welcoming the positive economic return they gain from tourism, this research suspects that the euphoric acceptance by the locals towards tourists is merely to make money from the tourists and not necessary because the hosts are sincerely interested in meeting with the tourists. This survey also discovered that the population of the four islands studied has started to feel the heat of tourism and have identified many effects associated with tourism. The locals can

also clearly associate the moral degradation of local youths to the arrival of tourists. The social and environmental impacts, like water pollution, are taking place over a long period. This makes it difficult to assess the impacts, to justify and to clearly associate them with tourism. Worse still, like other physical impacts, it is very difficult to undo the damages.

The result from this study is rather alarming in many ways. Destructive physical and social consequences can only lead to the total degradation of the islands in the eyes of general tourists. This is indeed bad for tourism. A different study found that the recent decline in tourist arrivals in Langkawi indicated that Langkawi has lost its (original) charm that attracted tourists, especially domestic tourists (Badaruddin et. al, 2004). This decline is perhaps because the island has been developed too fast, has relied more on speculation of the potentials of tourism, without really being driven by real data. The influx of mass tourism has indeed opened the islands to all, making them defenseless against the negative impact brought by tourists. These negative consequences (like environmental degradations and the higher prices of goods) do not only affect local residents but also would deter tourists in the long term. Failure to take an integrated and holistic approach to developing the islands in Malaysia will only expose these islands to future decline, in terms of both their beauty as well as the number of tourist arrivals!

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